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# Debut in California— AF's Mystery Plane

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EDWARDS AIR FORCE BASE, Calif.

The Air Force brought out its revolutionary A-11 war plane for all to see in the bright desert sunshine yesterday, burning away some of the mystery and controversy that has surrounded the aircraft since President Johnson announced its existence on Feb. 29.

A team of Air Force generals and colonels described it as an "excellent interceptor." They said emphatically that it was indeed the "improved manned interceptor that the Air Force has been asking for." The A-11 is now designated the YF-12A.

Although many of the operational details remain secret, sources here said the plane's ability to cruise at more than 2,000 miles an hour, together with its advanced fire control and air-to-air missile systems, might permit a single YF-12A to replace eight or 10 existing interceptors. The Air Defense Command now has about 800 fighters of various kinds protecting the North American continent.

## RATIO

Studies are under way to determine just what the effectiveness ratio of the YF-12A is to existing interceptors. The higher the ratio, the stronger the Air Force's sales pitch to Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara can be.

The Air Force has made it clear that, regardless of any previous reservations it may have had about the plane, it now wants to produce the YF-12A in some quantity and deploy it in the next couple of years.

The Defense Department has made no decision on the multi-billion-dollar project yet. One of the biggest questions to be answered is how much longer the missile-oriented Russians will pose a bomber threat to the continental United States.

When President Johnson dramatically announced successful development of a Mach-3 plane, it precipitated considerable speculation and dispute. Part of the flap resulted from the extremely tight secrecy that had surrounded the development project since its inception in 1959. The F-108 interceptor project was canceled in 1959.

It was generally assumed last February that the YF-12A had been started as a super reconnaissance plane to succeed the U-2. This belief is still widely held. Because of this, it was believed that the Air Force really wanted a different and better plane as its "improved manned interceptor."

There was some skepticism as to the utility of the revolutionary design for interceptor missions. There was also some skepticism about the President's motives for making the announcement at all. Some observers thought he was simply grabbing a handy project off the shelf to rebut Sen. Barry Goldwater's argument that the

Democrats were allowing the defense establishment to grow obsolete. Yet, it was and still is freely acknowledged that the Eisenhower administration started the project.

In July, further controversy developed when the President announced the SR-71, a strategic reconnaissance plane. Some aircraft experts and observers believe that the SR-71 is simply a modified YF-12A.

## SECRETS

Yesterday, the Air Force sought to end doubts about the effectiveness of the YF-12A. It flew the plane for the benefit of reporters and disclosed some previously secret information. The black plane is about 100 feet long. The thin, graceful forward portion flares back gradually into a relatively narrow wing assembly which, at its widest point, is about 50 feet. This would seem to indicate rather limited maneuverability—a serious drawback in conventional interceptions. The plane is powered by two J-58 turbo jet engines.

However, the Air Force says the YF-12A "was designed to accomplish the air defense mission utilizing a completely different concept of operations from current interceptors." Not only can the new plane fly several hundred miles an hour faster than the top speed of the most advanced operational interceptor—the F-106 Delta Dagger—it can also maintain this maximum speed throughout its mission. Existing interceptors cruise most economically at subsonic speeds. Their operating radius is severely restricted if they fly continually at peak speed.

Also, the YF-12A can fire at enemy manned bombers—or the missiles launched by enemy bombers—from farther away than existing fighters. Finally, the AIM-47A air-to-air guided missile carried by the YF-12A can be fired from a high-cruise altitude at targets above, below or to either side of the interceptor. This is one of the answers to the maneuverability problem of the interceptor. The plane's altitude is described officially at "over 70,000 feet." Some observers think this is an understatement.

## THE MISSILE

The solid-fueled missiles, measuring 150 inches in length and 13.5 inches in diameter, can carry either a nuclear or conven-

tional warhead. The missiles ride within the fuselage of the plane and emerge from the belly much like bombs dropping from a World War II plane's bomb bay.

An explosive force ejects the missile to assure that it clears the plane. Then the rocket motor ignites, sending the device forward at Mach-6 speed.

One of the more significant capabilities of the new plane is its independence of ground radar and support. Present interceptors depend on ground direction to their targets until the target is fairly close. The improvement here is significant because, in the event of an all-out enemy attack that might start with missiles and end with mop-up bombers, air defense ground installations might be damaged or wiped out.